

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Northeast and Islands Laboratory at Brown University

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The LAB Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University evaluation visit occurred at the LAB's offices in Providence, Rhode Island from May 24-28, 1999. The following reflects a review of the materials, interviews with numerous staff, discussion with clients, and other materials including web based material available to the evaluation team.

In seeking to understand and review the activities of the LAB at Brown, the following questions were posed to all groups and individuals interviewed.

- What is the vision-long term?
- How is the Lab meeting the needs of end users both today and for sustainable impact into the future?
- What is happening with leveraging (scaling up) of activities with the pilot projects, other work, clients and at the LAB level?
- What is the evaluative feedback system? How is the impact of the activities being measured? What evidence do you have that this initiative is working and impacting student learning?
- How is technology being used to support the activities of the lab including dissemination, research, and communication?

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the LAB at Brown doing what they were approved to do during the first three contact years?

It is understood that the LAB is a new Lab and that these three years are also the initial three years of its existence. It is noted that the LAB has identified with its Board that an initial

objective was to create creditability in the region, to work within and take advantage of the resources of Brown University, and to have an effective voice in the region.

1. Strengths

The LAB was found to be meeting its contractual obligations. The executive director and staff of the LAB are knowledgeable and capable.

With regard to the important mission of establishing creditability in the region, a plan to build strategic partners has been initiated in a broad based, effective manner. Strategic partnerships have been created with major and critical organizations in the region. Partners include the major accreditation organization in the region NEASC, NEA/AFT, Superintendents, principal groups and an extensive number of boards starting with the LAB's board that encompasses several major groups including commissioners of education in the region.

The LAB does have the essential infrastructure elements related to budgeting, human resources, technology, using the University's existing services in these areas to fulfill their obligations. The use of Brown University established managerial services allows these support functions to be completed in a quality manner with a minimal burden on the LAB. The Information Center keeps extensive information and a publication committee reviews all proposed publications to provide quality control. The board of the LAB members and its structure serve the LAB in a highly effective manner.

The work, which the LAB identified to be done in multiple task areas, has been initiated. The focus of this work has changed in some instances but changes have been in response to identified needs from the region and clients.

The LAB has also delineated its work to bring focus and not dilute its efforts. Their existing partners are of high quality and bring important resources to the LAB's identified

initiatives. The LAB has terminated partnerships that were ineffective. They are applauded for this effort and encouraged to maintain relationships only when they are productive and seek those partners who can leverage their resources in areas of priority.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

The composition of the LAB staff would benefit from greater diversity and additional representation in critical constituencies that the LAB and its program are committed to serve. This includes rural, poverty, the islands, and minority groups including blacks, native Americans, and language minority groups. This is a critical area that is of importance to the success and effectiveness of the dissemination, planning and other major functions of the LAB. Creditability and meaningfulness of the LAB's efforts will be limited unless all voices and constituencies are well represented throughout their activities.

With regard to the LAB working within and tapping the resources of Brown University, a heightened visibility and sustained working relationship with university faculty is strongly encouraged. There exist some examples in which Brown faculty is associated with the Standards and with the Restructuring of Secondary School Initiatives related to certification. It would seem that this brings an important research base and richness to the LAB's work. It is also noted that efforts in the important technology area will continue to be hindered without full staffing. The LAB seems to be cognizant of these needs. With respect to the technology area, efforts to address this need with the university have been initiated. However, this may be an important area to seek greater use of University personnel. There is a growing need to utilize technology in all aspects of the management process. In all areas, the personnel resources of Brown should be actively sought and involved in a highly visible manner throughout the LAB's activities.

3. Recommendations

- Expand the diversity of the LAB's staff particularly at the level of project teams in the major priority areas.
- Fully staff the technology area and consider increased staffing in the technology area.
- Expand wherever possible and make a guiding principle to include in an active, visible manner Brown faculty.
- Expand representation throughout the needs identification, planning, investigation, and dissemination activities to reflect the rich diversity of this region in particular the voices of the rural, poverty, Native American, different language, and black constituencies.

B. To what extent is the LAB at Brown using self-monitoring processes to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

The system of state liaisons who in many cases live in the region they serve is a direct response to an identified need for accessibility, visibility, and representation in the states and islands the LAB serves. Moreover, the broadly based composition of the LAB board coupled with an exemplary effort to structure meetings that encourage interchange and awareness among LAB initiatives, with the Board members, and in the regions they serve on a rotating basis is excellent.

The number of meetings with various groups, the formulation of study groups, (i.e. the superintendents group) fosters active involvement in an in-depth manner in the identification of needs. Those people who represented these various groups spoke glowingly of the LAB's accessibility, involvement, and responsiveness to needs identified.

Quality assurance procedures are in place. Substantial documentation of all activities including detailed minutes, summaries, and reports of visits, were evident. The LAB itself has implemented a portfolio component to their self-assessment. This models what is being asked of

teachers and is a useful tool to complement the other elements of a quality assurance system. The existence of an outside evaluation group, Abt, who provide independent auditing of the LAB's activities, enhances the quality assurance and feedback system available to the LAB's leadership. They have begun to survey clients and collect information that should be helpful to the LAB.

The strategic partners in the LAB's activities have already paid significant dividends in impacting on important policies in the region. Specifically, the New York City work, the standards that are being embraced in several states, and the work on accreditation reflect the partnering power created in a relatively short time by the LAB. This has been achieved through their strategic partnering and responsiveness to field based needs in the region.

2. Area of Needed Improvement

The scope of the LAB's work and the assessment of its successes should be broadened. Projects at this early stage of investigation are almost exclusively qualitative and quantitative information should be at least planned in the signature projects areas.

3. Recommendations

- Expand the quantitative collection and reporting of progress starting with whom and the degree of penetration that the work is having. Surveys or other collection of data to determine the awareness and perceived effectiveness particularly at the classroom and parent level would be a valuable and meaningful goal for self-assessment purposes.

III. Quality

To what extent is the LAB at Brown developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

The two signature initiatives reflected competently implemented qualitative research grounded on recent research and best practices. Much of the lab work that was presented

reflected strong qualitative, research-based efforts that have been tailored to the needs of the field. These are highly valuable research efforts. The LAB's work on teacher professional development recognizes an important area of inquiry in which in-depth, multiple year studies have been minimal.

2. Areas for Improvement

There is a need to have this work highlighted on the national level and published in national publications to broaden the visibility of this valuable work. National conferences are also an important next step for the presentation of this work and the important issues it raises.

There is also an important need to expand this research to examine the impact of this work in terms of student outcomes.

3. Recommendations

- Expand the publication and presentation of this work to the national level.
- Multiple student learner outcomes need to be examined as important aspect of determining and documenting the impact of this work on student learning.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the LAB at Brown useful to and used by the customers?

1. Strengths

The products and services, which the LAB provides, are tailored specifically to the needs of their clients. They have provided services and products directly responsive to client needs. As previously mentioned many of the products, through the LAB's strategic partnering, have had or are having a significant impact at the policy level (i.e. standards for non-English speaking students). Numerous clients interviewed representing major organizations and classroom staff

attested to the value and usefulness of the services and materials they have received from the LAB. Services provided have included literature review and have directly facilitated the application of research to improve policy and practice.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Data to date regarding the materials and services of the LAB is opinion and testimonial in nature. While some materials (i.e., standards and credentialling process) have had obvious impact on policy and will likely impact on practice, there are limited plans in place to obtain data as to the extended use and usefulness of these materials specifically with respect to student learner outcomes. Moreover, the importance of scaling up would be enhanced if replication activities were more clearly defined and pursued.

The materials and reports would benefit from being written more effectively for the practitioner including more visually appealing formatting. The accessibility and the support material that will need to be developed in conjunction with this material needs to be of high quality and must be included to maximize the usefulness and usability of such efforts. The plans to create a video archive of teacher classroom examples is an excellent, needed and useful expansion of materials that will assist in implementation efforts in schools.

3. Recommendations

- Plans to measure the impact on student learning is the goal for the LAB's work. Therefore, it is paramount that planning and developing procedures and research evidence of the usefulness of this work on student learning outcomes be pursued vigorously.
- The effective dissemination of material and most importantly, its use will depend upon how it is packaged. The materials presently available for the English language learners are not at that level. It is understood that by making available three sustainable strategies the need for people to adapt them to their situation and to find other strategies is encouraged. Therefore, quality packaging of materials should clearly state this principle, provide suggested resources for identification of additional strategies or possible ways to adopt these strategies. It is also important to clearly

identify those significant elements required for these strategies and other strategies to be effective. International Reading Association has a strategy flip document that is highly user friendly and useable in the classroom on effective reading strategies.

- Materials must be available in multiple formats. Given the limited access some schools still have to the Internet, CD-ROM's should be explored. CD-ROMs because of their capacity and their non-linear nature can be superior to videotape for some materials. CD's are also highly cost effective and can serve a dual purpose since they can in effect be a website on disc, which allows web work to be more extensively disseminated at a minimum of development cost.

B. To what extent is the LAB at Brown focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

Those interviewed at the regional, state, and local level lauded the responsiveness and effectiveness of the LAB staff. The LAB staff was applauded for their extensive investment in developing relationships in the schools during the first year of the Standards for non English speaking students, their visibility in classrooms, and their non-threatening support role in effect change.

The state liaisons and their relocation in the states they serve resulted from customer need and allow greater responsiveness to state needs.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

Reflective of diversity of the limited to testimonial.

It must be recognized that in part the responsiveness to clients will change in scaling up activities when work is required for clients who have not actively sought the LAB's assistance. It will be important to provide assistance in the scaling up process to those who are not seeking help and in fact will initially view LAB staff as outsiders or intruders who are thrusting unwanted change upon them.

There are important research questions that need to be explored and require replication in a variety of venues. Alignment of client needs and wishes may not always be aligned with

quality research procedures or important aspects of a research area. Replication of the LAB's promising lines of research would enhance what we learn and how well results can generalize. This will be important if leadership in the field is to occur.

3. Recommendations

- Replicate promising lines of research in diverse settings.
- Raise the questions that are deserving of investigation and pursue them even though those receiving service have not actively sought assistance.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the LAB's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

As the LAB contends standards based restructuring and the work in the high school reform effort will contribute to improved student achievement. There is evidence both in the high school accreditation work and the standards of non-English speaking students at the middle school that these efforts raise standards, focus on best practices, promote equity of opportunity, and at the classroom level teachers involved in the process report changes in student achievement. Specifically, classroom staff reported changes in student writing, the scores on the Mass Assessment tests in writing, and student grades. A Boston study, a longitudinal study which the LAB sites, demonstrates students in these programs earn more and are more successful several years after they graduate in comparison to students not in such programs.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

While the two signature works provide many elements which the research suggests are critical in contributing to improved student learning and success, the evidence at this time is not

documented nor are there clear plans to collect data to determine their impact on student learning. Moreover, there is a need to identify meaningful professional development indicators and student learner outcome variables for longitudinal, quantitative research efforts.

3. Recommendations

- Develop a research program or elicit and support those that will document the impact on student learning.
- There exists some important opportunities for data on student learning to be collected. One example is the initiation this year in Massachusetts of new statewide testing. This provides realistic, timely, and a cost effective opportunity to obtain baseline and longitudinal data on a statewide basis that can have impact on a region in which such testing is common and which have national implications as well.

B. To what extent does the LAB at Brown assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

The reports and testimonials of those interviewed suggests a pervasive, broadbased level of service responsive to the identified needs of the region, state, and local districts has been initiated. Moreover, the evidence exists that the standards for English language learners are resulting in school improvement strategies, which must be more comprehensive if they are to meet the newly developed standards. In the case of secondary schools, the process of accreditation that emphasizes improvement, student learning, and equity of opportunity for all students coupled with the School to Work research will require a comprehensive reform of high schools in the region, and the development of school improvement plans that include strategies to achieve these improvements.

The LAB has also begun to support and assist successful schools and districts to share their experience. The promotion of these models through presentations at conferences in the area is important and valuable.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

The LAB has made significant contributions in this area in a relatively short time. However, the implementation process is an equally significant next step. The LAB has gained some important knowledge and experience in the process of such change. It is important that they find ways to share this knowledge. The inclusion of these successful models on various programs, conferences, and meetings is a laudable first step. It is also important to expand these opportunities through multiple dissemination activities that extend visibility to classroom audiences. These efforts should be complemented with the commitment of broadly initiating and expanding collaborative activities using the newly available technologies. The electronic collaborative activities are at this time minimal and do not fully take advantage of technology available today. For example, video conferencing and streaming video can be done over the Internet without requiring special facilities.

3. Recommendations

- Provide materials to support and help train schools and district in the important process activities to assist in implementing comprehensive school reform.
- The replication of promising activities should be initiated to broaden the generalizability of the work of the LAB.
- Expand the visibility of successful models on a national level.
- Utilize readily available technology tools to deliver on expanded electronic collaborative, sharing and dissemination efforts.

C. To what extent has the LAB made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

Their involvement, visibility, and creditability is evidenced in part by the requests for their services from the Chancellor of NY City, organizations such as NAESC, and several states.

The work they are doing in partnership with their partners and such activities as Portraits of Success for NABE and the Toolkit for ASCD, as well as inclusion of the national teacher unions, indicate a growing opportunity on the national scene. Moreover, the research issues that the LAB has pursued such as secondary school restructuring, teacher professional development, English Language Learners are issues that are of national interest.

The lab has some exciting and quality prototypes of technology and web activities. The NABE site, and the recognized service the LAB provides in the area of research information, are just some of the excellent collaborative notions that have just begun. The development of a teacher classroom practice in the form of a video archive can make a significant contribution to the field and implementation activities.

2. Areas of Needed Improvement

The limited number of materials, the practitioner unfriendliness of most the publications (i.e. reports) and the strictly qualitative nature of the work to date limit impact and visibility. The minimal presence at this time of Internet and other technology products in the rapidly growing telecommunication arena needs to be expanded and will hinder broader exposure. Another important area to leverage the LAB's work and contribution is expanded collaboration with National Centers and other labs around special areas such as English Language Learners. In combination with a dissemination plan, the LAB needs to develop and execute infusion of technology to disseminate and scale up their demonstrated successful programs

Presentations also have been primarily local and regional. The LAB's exciting and important research efforts need to be showcased in new venues including national practitioner conferences and major national research conventions.

3. Recommendations

- The completion of some of the materials that have been started including the video on standards and the video archive of teacher practices and the expansion to include multiple media formatted material would be essential.
- The quality of written materials for wide consumption requires that packaging and formatting of materials be enhanced to increase their use and usability.
- The expansion of presentation of model schools and districts on national conference agendas would build on what has been initiated in the region.
- Publish in journals and make presentations that covered the spectrum from respected research (i.e. AERA) and the practitioner community from AASA to ASCD to IRA(practicing administrator, curriculum directors, and teacher national professional groups).
- Expand the use and infusion of technology efforts. This may require additional partnering and outsourcing. At a minimum, fully staffing this important area in the LAB is critical.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs and Services

and

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

The LAB at Brown has established creditability in a region in which the previous LAB had been seen as ineffective and non-responsive. The LAB proposal was excellent and laid out an ambitious and important mission to service the region and be responsive to the federal requirements of a lab. To the credit of the LAB at Brown University, strategic partners that reach into all levels and represent broad-based regional constituencies have been built in a short period of time. Moreover, as a new LAB an overall gearing up and opening of doors to immediately service the needs in the region has occurred. The overall management activities using the resources of Brown are in place and permit attention to be given to the substantive

mission of the LAB. The staff and leadership of LAB provide quality, commitment, and fervor for the work of the LAB.

The mission described in the proposal and where the LAB is today leaves some areas in need of review to assure that they are being adequately addressed. For example, the proposal talks about leveraging of and tapping of the Brown resources in terms of LAB activities. It does not seem that the visible involvement of Brown faculty is as extensive as it could or should be given the rich research questions that the LAB's initiatives are generating. Another example in referencing to the materials and products of the LAB relates to the unevenness and often sterile nature of much of what is being produced. The University likely has resources to tap in this area. Similarly, in the area of technology given the lack of fully staffing positions, some shortfall could likely be filled with students and faculty who are also exploring how to effectively integrate and leverage technology in their own teaching.

The LAB, based on the testimonials of numerous, broadbased representation of clients who attest to the credibility and responsiveness to client needs, has provided assistance throughout the region. The LAB has created an image of responsiveness, quality work, and serving the needs identified throughout the region. The extensive strategic partners including Universities, districts, organizations both in the region including Rural School Superintendents and NEASC as well as organizations that have national impact including the teacher unions and national organization of elementary principals are active participants and members of the governance and initiatives of the LAB.

The staffing of the LAB needs continued attention to address issues of staffing at designated levels (i.e. Shortfall in area of technology), the representation of the diversity of the region in the LAB staff, and a plan to maintain and train staff once they have been hired. The

importance of coordination of LAB activities and cross-fertilization among LAB groups, other Labs, and national centers needs continued attention. To the credit of the LAB, the presentation of LAB groups on a regular basis for the board and the Lab, the retreats, and the regular reviews are meaningful steps the internal interrelationship, cross fertilization, and coordination of LAB initiatives.

The LAB's initiatives are significant in the addressing of high profile issues and looking at the difficult issues related to the process of reform, restructuring, standards, English language learners, change and capacity building. The work is significant in its immersion in the trenches. The work is qualitative in nature, which is consistent with the relatively uncharted research areas being explored. The documentation of the process (i.e. New York City) and English Language Learners is extensive.

The LAB initiatives are qualitative in nature and reflect singular, voluntary, pilot activities. Replication of these initiatives is an important part of the planning and scaling up activities.

Quantitative evidence is also needed. At a minimum there needs to be planning for and guidance given to the field as to the collection of quantitative data. Schools, districts, and parents are going to ask: How does this impact student learning in my child's school? Are the resources we are committing to the process of reform and change paying off for students? Therefore, as an important aspect of dissemination it would seem the LAB has a significant role to play in, at a minimum, providing some research based, informed guidelines to the types of measures that will be meaningful. While the LAB may not undertake this line of research, others are pressed to provide this data and need to determine what impact these initiatives have on teaching and student learning.

The impact of the LAB's initiative in conjunction with their strategic partnering has created opportunities for dissemination and a platform to build upon in the scaling up process. Significantly, the impact of several initiatives has already been included in major policy changes that have extensive impact. The work on accreditation is reflected in new accreditation procedures that will impact 700 secondary schools in the region. The work in NY City is reflected in the Chancellor's planning and in actual legislative action. The standards work is directly reflected in third grade reading standards in at least one state and standards in the state of Massachusetts.

There is an important role to play on a continuing basis to support the natural scaling up that the LAB has strategically laid the foundation to occur. Those attempting to adopt and adapt these initiatives need to have tools, products, material, and support to implement these processes in their venues. As has been wonderfully illustrated in the LAB's signature works, the need to build credibility, foster collaboration, and effect change takes hard work and requires a long-term commitment to a process. The LAB's knowledge and experience in this process needs to be widely shared.

The LAB has some excellent examples of materials and products that provide support. They have produced a variety of written documents. They have some materials that are highly useable in the field. Publications like *Electronic Collaboration*, the series *School Matters*, the *Themes in Education Series*, The ASCD published *Toolbox*, and the *Nine Effective Literacy Practices* are good examples. However, the use and usability of a number of materials is sterile. The formatting and packaging of materials should adhere to a more consistent standard with more visually presented material. There also needs to be more materials provide in multiple media formats. The use of videotape seems to have only just begun. CD formats need to be

explored.

As with materials, there are some excellent prototypes of the use of technology. Technology that supports and fosters collaboration, a major identified commitment in the standards initiative (See page 30 of Introduction to Lab, Jan, 1999 document) and the recognition of the importance of interaction are important directions. However, while some exciting initial efforts have begun, a plan to scale these up and importantly, to research their effectiveness, seemingly, is only beginning to be developed.

The LAB has made significant strides in a short period of time. They have created credibility in the region, are providing extensive services in response to their clients needs, have initiated important and high profile research initiatives, and have had important policy impact throughout the region. They are to be congratulated on what has been accomplished to date. It is hoped that the above comments can help to support continued development and significant advancement in this critical mission of quality education for our future leaders.